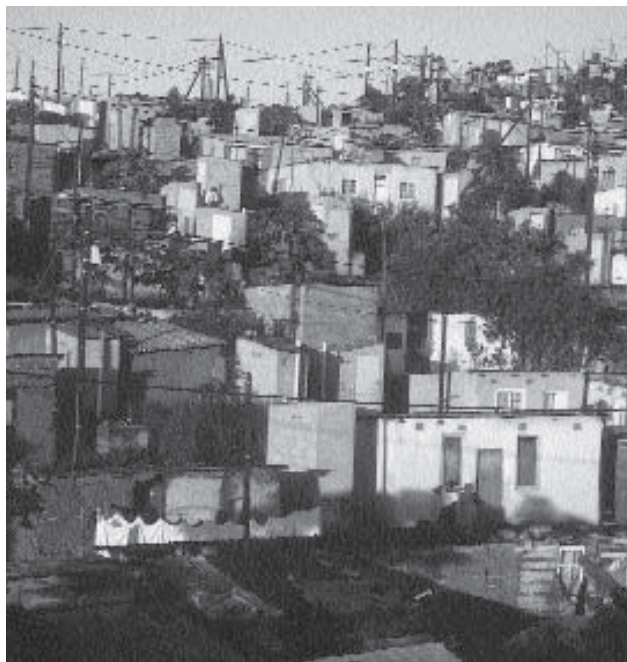


# From Seattle to Johannesburg

*The Seattle movement – which came to the fore during the WTO negotiations in Seattle in 1999 – is expected to converge on Johannesburg for the WSSD. **Michael Sachs** analyses the character of the Seattle movement and points out that its progressive credentials should not be taken for granted. There are many currents in its broad stream, and some flow against the tide of development in the South.*



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The origins of Seattle are complex. In both form and content it has direct roots in earlier periods of mass mobilisation, particularly in industrialised countries and often referred to as the 'new social movements'. These include, amongst others, the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, the peace and hippy movements of the 1960s, the conservation and environmental movements that emerged in the 1970s and the anti-apartheid/anti-racism movements of the 1980s.

Developments in the traditional left and working class organisations have also been key. After the cold winter of the 1980s (where Thatcher, Reagan and Kohl dominated the politics of the First World) social democratic parties, with roots in earlier periods of proletarian resistance, swept to power across Europe. However, against the backdrop of rapid globalisation, these progressive parties appeared to continue the policies of their neoliberal predecessors, thus casting doubt on the continued relevance of the Social-Democratic project. At the same time the collapse of the Soviet bloc threw Marxist-Leninist tendencies into turmoil around the world. 'Social movement trade unionism' (particularly *Solidarnosc* in Poland) and the re-emergence of 'civil society' in Eastern Europe that assisted with this collapse were also crucial inspirations and precursors to Seattle. The apparent failure of both the Social Democratic and Leninist tendencies to advance the interests of the working class from the helm of state sent many from the left onto the streets in search of new

answers to old questions. This spurred the growth of a 'new left', which, although closely associated with the 'new social movements' of the 1960s and '70s, had at most tenuous connections to the broad workers' movement and little experience of mass-based electoral mobilisation.

Perhaps the most inspiring factor in the origins of the Seattle movement was the Zapatista uprising of 1994. This military expression of discontent among Mexico's 'indigenous people' coincided with the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into force in January 1994. NAFTA awoke the Americas to the era of capitalist globalisation and, simultaneously, the Zapatista uprising provided a direct link between North American and South American struggles, all of which regarded themselves as resisting this corporate-led/private sector agenda. In Seattle, these and other streams of dissent found collective strength in a single, but turbulent, confluence of popular mobilisation.

It would be premature to characterise the content of the Seattle movement. However, what is clear is that a new cultural/political space has been defined: an arena of mass mobilisation that, to a large degree, was abandoned by traditional parties in western democracies who converted themselves into narrow electoral machines.

Those who have filled this space have also transformed it with new approaches to dissent. Like the Zapatistas, many do not seek to ascend to state power in order to transform the existing socioeconomic order. Rather, in keeping with their roots in cultural dissent, they aim to 'reinvent daily life as a whole', to construct alternative systems in creative action.

### Seattle in the South?

No doubt much sound and fury will be associated with the Johannesburg Summit. But the Seattle movement is likely to have longer-term consequences for our own political terrain. If so, what are they likely to be? This raises important questions of the relation of Seattle to the South. Is it a truly global movement, or essentially a movement of the North? If global, what is its relation to the struggle for a post-imperialist world? And, if Northern, how does it interface with progressive movements in the South?

*The Seattle movement* has creatively linked Northern with Southern struggles. This partly mirrors the growing importance of large global companies, with supply chains that cut across national boundaries. These *transnational corporations* have spawned a new *trans-nationalism* of resistance: 'Thanks to Shell Oil and Chevron, human rights activists in Nigeria, democrats in Europe, environmentalists from North America have united in a fight against the unsustainability of the oil industry... It is Nike, of course, that has most helped to pioneer this new brand of activist synergy. Students facing corporate take-over of their campuses by the Nike swoosh have linked up with workers making its branded campus apparel, as well as with parents concerned at the commercialisation of youth and church groups campaigning against child labour - all united by their different relationships to a common global enemy.'

But the Seattle movement is not yet truly global. It has emerged from (and remains rooted within) a history of typically *Northern* forms of struggle. The popular expressions associated with its existence are (until now) all linked with the names of Western capitals: Seattle, Genoa, Washington,

Cologne and Birmingham. It may be the case, too, that in the global relationships of struggle forged against a common enemy, it is the North that is most commonly the dominant partner.

This is evident in the unidirectional flows of funding that construct 'civil society' in the South, as well as the political and ideological agendas that shamelessly underpin such funding.

In South Africa, for example, 'civil society' is frequently construed to exclude popular organisations by definition. Those with any link to a mass base, such as trade unions, student formations, organised religious communities, civics or any other popular organisation that emerged from the anti-apartheid struggle, fall outside the scope of 'civil society'. Instead, 'civil society' is (in both theory and practice) conflated with 'NGOs', a narrow network of service and advocacy groups. These organisations are free of any association with the project of national liberation, and therefore, are the only structures that will satisfy the bias for 'independence' in the donor community.

Furthermore, while it is true that thousands of 'civil society' activists from the South have been drawn into global networks of dissent, Seattle's dependence on digital technology and frequent air travel imposes serious limitations on them. In Africa, for example, there are (on average) only two telephone lines for every 100 people (in some countries there is one for every 1 000); and Internet access is largely confined to capital cities.

These facts impose selection mechanisms for African (and other Southern) participants that are anything but 'democratic and horizontal'. And this raises the ugly but important question of the politics that underlie such selections. The potential (if not actual) problem emerges of a small

coterie of activists, residing in Southern capitals and raising the banner of Seattle in the South by linking to its electronic networks in the North; but being distinguished by their lack of any tangible connection to popular politics or developmental action. Their importance (for the North) is to provide a fig leaf over the absence of Southern leadership, but their actual relevance to broader popular struggles in the South is limited, and therefore, their claims to represent a 'countervailing force' to a 'global elite' are trite and self-serving.

#### **Seattle vs. Jo'burg #1: National liberation & the state**

In South Africa, the national liberation movement remains, for all its alleged misdemeanours, the main progressive force around which popular anti-imperialist and transformatory politics are organised. The convergence of these progressive forces is given concrete expression in the tripartite alliance, which is based on a fundamental strategic agreement that 'the primary task of the current period is the implementation of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR)'. In other words, while certainly at odds over important areas of policy, all actors within the mainstream of progressive politics agree on the need to build a national democratic state as a vital step towards the creation of a post-apartheid society founded on the vision of the Freedom Charter.

But amongst Seattle's multitude are many who are hostile to the project of national liberation and the Third World nation-state. Ideas of *anti-statism* come in various shapes and guises: from the anarchist left to the neoliberal right. Some believe the nation-states of the South, far from being the potential apparatus of social transformation in the hands of the poor, are an intrinsic part of a new machinery of imperial

domination. For example, Hardt and Negri in their influential book *Empire*, argue that: 'The postcolonial nation-state functions as an essential and subordinated element in the global organisation of the capitalist market ... From India to Algeria and Cuba to Vietnam, *the state is the poisoned gift of national liberation.*'

In their view the nature of the nationalism amongst the oppressed is ambiguous during the struggle against colonialism since it exhibits both progressive and reactionary tendencies. Once the anti-colonial struggle achieves national sovereignty, however, nationalism of the oppressed becomes thoroughly reactionary.

If we accept this view of *national-liberation-in-state*, we would conclude that projects of Third World national liberation, including our own, should be tossed to the dustbins of history, together with the systems of transnational domination that have inevitably co-opted them. Our democratic and non-racial state is, and can be, nothing but an agent of a new Empire. This view, which is common amongst Seattle activists, goes against the grain of the project of national liberation around which progressive South Africans are broadly united.

#### **Seattle vs. Jo'burg #2: Growth and development in the South**

The second potential area of programmatic contradiction between the Seattle movement and the South revolves around the question of the environment and its relation with growth and development, particularly in the South.

In South Africa, the recent alliance summit 'placed the challenge of economic growth, development, job creation and poverty eradication at the centre of the challenges we face in the current period'. As progressives we may

differ on the relations between democracy and development, or between growth and redistribution. But nobody seriously challenges the urgency and centrality of economic growth and social development. This accords with the consistent position of the South in international fora; especially those, which, like the forthcoming WSSD, are concerned with issues of environmental protection. At the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 Indira Gandhi (then Prime Minister of India) famously remarked, 'Poverty is the worst form of pollution'. This is not a position against environmental protection, which is clearly important to all. Rather it is a position that the central and most urgent problem faced by humanity is the eradication of poverty. To overcome this problem, a fundamental restructuring of international economic relations is required.

But many in Seattle would not agree. The greens (who are of no small significance to the Seattle movement) reject the imperative for growth and development in the South. They argue that the environment is simply not big enough to accommodate it. For example, the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBS), a think-tank associated with the German Green party, argues that: '...if all the countries of the globe followed the industrial model, five planets would be required to provide the carbon sinks needed by economic development. As humanity is left with just one, such an equity approach would become the mother of all disasters. Consequently, there is no escape from the conclusion that the world's growing population cannot attain a Western standard of living by following conventional paths to development. The resources required are too vast, too expensive, and too damaging to local and global ecosystems.'

In other words, the South should not do what the North did. It should not attempt to accelerate industrial growth and development, which has been shown to reduce poverty. Instead, the South should 'leapfrog' into an age of solar power. It should devise a new 'development path' based on eco-friendly technology and harmony with nature.

In a purely linear sense we cannot escape the logic of the green arguments. If the South did follow exactly the same 'development path' as the North, this would certainly result in the destruction of the planet. Furthermore, unlike the past, we now have the technology and the knowledge to avoid a path that entirely consumes its own natural resource base. Who could argue that the South should not seize the advantage of the latecomer and integrate such knowledge into its programmes.

But the Northern Development Model, which the greens so roundly condemn for its environmental abandon, is not simply based on the inappropriate application of knowledge. In addition to being environmentally unsustainable, it is a 'development path' that is founded on the colonial subjugation of the world. Therefore, the 'development path' followed by the South most certainly cannot mimic that of the North: it must be different in a host of respects, of which the application of environmentally friendly technology is perhaps amongst the less urgent.

More urgent, one would think, to development in the South, is the question of the fundamental and morally repugnant systemic imbalances in North-South relations that are premised on history which the North continues to maintain and through its political and economic dominance. For example, Oxfam recently reported that:

'If Africa, East Asia, South Asia, and Latin America were each to increase their share of world exports by 1%, the resulting gains in income could lift 128 million people out of poverty... In their rhetoric, governments of rich countries constantly stress their commitment to poverty reduction. Yet the same governments use their trade policy to conduct what amounts to robbery against the world's poor. When developing countries export to rich-country markets, they face tariff barriers that are four times higher than those encountered by rich countries. Those barriers cost them \$100bn a year – twice as much as they receive in aid.'

The demand for development in the South is, therefore, linked with a restructuring of the international division of labour towards a more efficient global growth path. This implies we overcome the legacy of past injustice.

But, the effect (if not the intention) of the green argument is to shift the debate away from these questions of North-South relations. It is argued that the historic divides *between* the colonised and the perpetrators of colonialism are irrelevant in a globalised world. Instead, the divisions *within* countries are emphasised. Once again this point is well put by the Heinrich Böll Foundation: '... The conventional North-South distinction obscures the fact that the dividing line in today's world, *if there is any*, is not primarily running between Northern and Southern societies, but right across all of these societies. The major rift appears to be between the globalised rich and the localised poor.

... In contrast to Rio, the Johannesburg Summit will concentrate on poverty eradication. The South may pin up the badge of poverty, demanding a greater share in the world

economy. However, while the task is a noble one, its politics are ambivalent... Much too often, and for quite some time now, the Southern governments, supported by their elites, have indulged in the expansion of their own consumer classes and have secured their own power base under the banner of poverty eradication. Against this background, it is clear that the struggle for poverty reduction will not be decided in controversies between Southern and Northern governments, but in conflicts between the marginalised majority and the global middle class – which includes domestic governments, corporations and multilateral institutions.'

Questions of global racism, of national domination, of imperialism, of the North bearing any responsibility for the poverty of the South are deftly avoided. Instead a crude notion of class war is deployed to delegitimise Southern states and undermine their demands for global equity in forums such as the WSSD. 'Domestic governments' (popular, democratic, progressive or not) are part of the problem.

Oddly, this position strikes a resounding chord with those on the outside-left of South Africa's liberation movement who have always argued that the 'national question' (the question of racism and racial oppression) is a distraction from 'pure' working class struggle.

But this strange coincidence of position signifies more than just an interesting ideological irony. In addition to providing the intellectual basis for many 'civil society' activists in the South, institutions such as the Heinrich Böll Foundation also deploy considerable financial resources to promote these views across the globe. They form part of a 'donor community' whose blessing is required for the



initiation and implementation of projects.

Anecdotally, last year's NGO-led march at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban illustrates the kind of confused irony that such relations can generate. South Africans were mobilised to oppose a conference *against* racism. The pamphlet that called them to this (strategically dubious) action, proclaimed: 'Another world is possible! Resist global capitalism!' and then, in fine print 'sponsored by the European Union'.

### Conclusions

Rather than being a movement *against* globalisation, the Seattle movement is itself a radical and democratic expression of the globalisation process. Through symbolic protest and cultural power, it poses a project of *popular*

counter-globalisation in contrast to that of *elite* globalisation. All progressives should welcome this development. After all, deepening of democracy and the building of alternatives in action requires a strong and diverse set of organisations, independent of the state.

However, given its Northern foundation, we should not uncritically accept that all those raising the banner of Seattle are friends of the South. Various currents converge on the confluence called Seattle, and amongst them are those that flow against the tide of national liberation and development in the South. Some are ideologically opposed to the state we are trying to build. Others oppose the imperative of poverty-reducing growth and development on which we agree.

For better or for worse, Seattle will have a direct influence in shaping the forces that contest the political space in the arena left behind by our cadreship in Parliament, government and union bureaucracy. Our challenge then is to ensure that we revitalise the link between this cadreship and the spaces of popular mobilisation that Seattle is redefining.

The Johannesburg Summit will provide an opportunity for progressives to do just this: an occasion for the broad liberation movement to assess its own role in national and global civil societies. While there are lessons of struggle that we can teach the world, it would also be important for us to learn from the thousands of activists, radicals and revolutionaries who will descend on our biggest city, many of whom played a direct and important role in the liberation of our country.

*This is an edited version of an article, which appears in the latest edition of the ANC's quarterly journal 'Umrabulo: Let's talk of politics'. Michael Sachs is a researcher for the ANC.*

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